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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores strategies, based on experience, for coping with principal reassignment. It focuses on practical, repeatable approaches to reassignment that might also help central-office administrators who are contemplating a shuffling of principals. It offers as a case study an elementary school, an Accelerated School in Salinas, California, that underwent a principal reassignment. The article outlines the Accelerated School's philosophy and process and the steps in transitioning to a new principal. It then relates how the school not only had its principal reassigned, it also lost the two coaches who were helping to implement the Accelerated School's format. The school community reacted by forming a steering committee that addressed one fundamental question: How do we shape the hiring process so that an individual who is sensitive to the school's history and active involvement as an Accelerated School can be hired? The steering committee acted as a clearinghouse of information and dealt directly with the superintendent of schools. The committee and the superintendent then drafted a "job description" for the two coach positions. The respect shown the steering committee and the school demonstrated the district's willingness to honor a process that one of its schools was deeply committed to. (RJM)

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Principal re-assignment in an accelerated school...

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Principal re-assignment in an accelerated school: A Steering Committee follows  
the process

by

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## **Introduction**

What course of action can the Accelerated Schools Project suggest to Accelerated Schools when a district "announces" that the current school principal is being transferred to another school despite the reported de-stabilizing effects of principal re-assignment? (Driver and Levin, 1997). What if this re-assignment results in the removal of a very popular and successful principal--so successful that they are being re-assigned to a "troubled" school--and the new principal is totally unfamiliar with the Accelerated Schools Model? Is such a policy misaligned with the principles of the Accelerated Schools philosophy and process?

The probability that school communities may successfully respond to principal re-assignment may depend upon the study of these greatly disruptive administrative changes. While under study, and short of changing the larger administrative philosophy which permits principal re-assignment, an arduous task at best, can the Project offer some practical, repeatable strategies prior to the actual transition period between principals? In employing these strategies, what kinds of specific actions might schools take when affected by such decisions? Might these actions raise the awareness of Central Office administrators contemplating principal re-assignment to the impact of processes that could be put into place to transition to a new principal more in keeping with the values and principles of the Accelerated Schools model?

A school in Salinas, CA offers an example of how one Accelerated School community took action in response to such circumstances. Their strategies are noteworthy because they illustrate the stabilizing and vital role of the Steering Committee as a focal point of the Accelerated Schools governance structure.

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### **Sherwood Elementary School**

At Sherwood Elementary School, the very scenario described above took place. After five successful years as principal, Edward Lopez was told that he was being moved to another school, in keeping with a district practice of regularly rotating administrators. It was difficult news for both Lopez and the school community to accept because Lopez had provided stable leadership for the school since the introduction of the Accelerated Schools model in 1993; were it up to him, he would have chosen to stay. Compounding the challenges in this transition was the fact that both of Sherwood's Accelerated Schools coaches were leaving their duties at the end of the year. One was retiring at mid-year, though she honored her commitment to Sherwood through the end of the school year. The other informed the district of her difficult decision to leave the district at the end of the year for personal reasons. The school community took a triple hit, losing the site administrator and both coaches simultaneously.

The staff of the school reacted with deep concern and searched for a vehicle to express their hopes for the future. By emphasizing the role of the Steering Committee within the context of the Accelerated Schools model, they were able to initiate a process to do just that.

Because lack of consistent mentorship and turnover of staff or principal succession are cited by informed educators familiar to school reform as challenges (Levin, 1997; Driver and Levin, 1997; Comer, 1998), the staff decided to seek a course which would stabilize the school. Their next steps triggered a series of actions which other schools may want to replicate as a model of what to do when confronted with a set of similar challenging circumstances.

### **The Accelerated Schools Philosophy and Process**

Before remarking further on Sherwood's course of action, it is important to become familiar with the components of the Accelerated Schools process

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relevant to the issue under study. The Accelerated Schools governance process consists of three levels: cadres, Steering Committee, and school-as-a-whole (SAW). Cadres are the small groups that inquire into the school's most important areas of concern--the school's priority challenge areas--where the school's present situation falls short of its vision. Ideally, cadres are composed of teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, students, district personnel, and community members (Hopfenberg, 1994, p. 88).

The school's Steering Committee serves at least six purposes:

- It's first and most important role is to ensure that the cadres and the entire school are moving in the direction of the school vision;
- It serves as a clearinghouse of information so that the cadres and all other groups in the school communicate and coordinate with one another rather than operating in isolation;
- It serves as a communication vehicle for disseminating information to cadres and school as a whole;
- It monitors the progress of cadres and all other groups in the school to ensure that they stay on track with the Inquiry Process;
- It helps cadres and other groups develop and refine recommendations for consideration by the school as a whole;
- It helps the administration deal with incoming information to the school and helps disseminate this new information to the cadres; (Hopfenberg, 1994, p. 88-9).

The Steering Committee is ideally comprised of cadre representatives, administrators, representative support staff, parents, students, central office staff members, community members, and members of any other group that requires representation (Hopfenberg, 1994).

The SAW is required to approve all decisions that have implications for the entire school. It must approve decisions before cadres begin implementing pilot programs.

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The SAW consists of all administrators, all teachers, all support staff, and parent, student, central office, and community representatives. Together, these three levels of participation enable schools to tackle their challenges "in a democratic but systematic way" (Hopfenberg, 1994, p. 87).

Sherwood's immediate hurdle was rising to the leadership challenges presented by the district's decision to re-assign their principal. An additional challenge involved the time constraints the school was forced to adopt in making contributions to shaping their future leadership. The Steering Committee played a key role in not only communicating the sensitive information inherent in the hiring of a new principal, it kept the school's vision alive as it sought a "good fit" between the incoming hire and the existing school community. Further, it helped the school seek to build on the strengths within the school itself as the search for coaching candidates took center stage.

The Steering Committee instilled in the school community a sense of security, involvement, and action as the school waded through potentially difficult waters (Hopfenberg, 1994). It provided the school with a single governance entity that was focused on the obvious question: "How do we shape the hiring process so that an individual who is sensitive to the school's history and active involvement as an Accelerated School can be hired?"

### **Transitioning to a New Principal**

The first step the school-as-a-whole took turned out to be the most critical and ultimately decisive step they could have possibly taken at the time. They decided to reinforce the Steering Committee as a "clearinghouse of information" (Hopfenberg, 1994, p.88) and invited the superintendent of the Salinas City School District, Jack Marchi, to attend a meeting to discuss their concerns. Representatives from the Steering Committee requested that he bring the prospective principal the district had already chosen to replace Lopez. The

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committee then asked if someone from Stanford's National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project would attend the meeting (the National Center has provided regular mentorship to the school since their initial training). The purpose of the meeting was to discern the views of the superintendent and to assess his level of support for continuing the Accelerated Schools process. As teacher and current coach Marsha Gubser explained, "In our cadres, we decided that we needed to have a meeting. Our coaches arranged it and we basically explained the process to our superintendent, why it was so important to have buy-in from our administrator" (Corral and Wagner, 1997).

The committee wanted assurances that they would have a new principal who would fit with the school culture, one that emphasizes consensus-building, parent participation, and recognizes the cultural identities of its students, as Gubser put it, "someone who would be committed to and support the ASP process, who would not only not get in the way, but who would actively support us."

"The superintendent told us, you guys have been trained, you are a strong staff, and you'll be able to carry it on. The point we were trying to make was, yes, but it isn't going to work if the administration isn't going the same way we are. I think he was able to hear us at that point," Gubser said. "I don't know how much he had really considered it before that" (Corral and Wagner, 1997). The school found continuity in the role of the Steering Committee because the committee acted decisively in gathering information and providing the school with a quality interactive session with a key stakeholder.

To his credit, Marchi not only attended the meeting, he brought an open mind and a willingness to sit down with the school community members and discuss the transition from Lopez's principalship to that of another individual, the principal of another local school. Gubser said, "We made our feelings clear

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to the superintendent that we wanted to continue with ASP and we wanted someone who would support that" (Corral and Wagner, 1997). The superintendent's presence alone was an extraordinarily positive commitment furthered by his willingness to commit additional resources to the school in the form of providing for new coaches to be trained. He demonstrated his understanding of the sensitive nature of such a transition, particularly in light of the fact that the school simultaneously lost two fine coaches. Leaving the meeting, it seemed that the processes that the Sherwood staff put into place could serve as a model for other schools and districts struggling with sensitive personnel transitions involving the school community members who are most affected by such decisions.

As for the prospective principal's participation, he was extremely tactful and straightforward in a potentially very difficult situation, and he appeared to strike responsive chords in his interactions with the committee. His open and honest style spoke to his great potential for continuing the work achieved within the Accelerated Schools governance structure should he become principal.

By having the prospective principal and superintendent in attendance, the Steering Committee was afforded the chance to have a far-ranging discussion aided by their own questions and those put forth by the National Center mentor. Both Marchi and the prospective principal were able to illustrate their perspectives on the transition and also ask questions they had on the role of coaching, the principles of the model, and the role of the principal in supporting the model's implementation.

The Steering Committee members seemed truly pleased that the tone of the session was highly supportive and that the session resulted in a great deal of information sharing and action being planned. Recalling their efforts over the years, they felt refreshed that the Accelerated Schools process paid off so visibly;



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the Steering Committee had fought to truly represent the school-as-a-whole. They were trying to build on years of previous experience in trying to provide coaching and principal support for the model and wanted a voice in decision-making on behalf of the school.

### **Recognizing the District Coach's Role**

As to how the coaches were to be "replaced," the discussion turned to descriptions of the present roles of the coaches and the expectations of the coaching team. Both were external to the school (one was a .40 FTE, the other a .20 FTE) with one funded directly from the school and the other from the Central Office (through Special Projects). Both had been responsible for training the whole school in its first year, and continued to work with the staff and parents in subsequent years. They offered constant attention to the cadres as they worked through their list of priorities, and assisted in the complex Inquiry Process. They also served as process gatekeepers, providing guidance for Steering Committee meetings and for school-as-a-whole meetings.

In the midst of discussions on coaching, Marchi questioned the stated need for a Central office administrator to be involved in the Accelerated Schools Project as a coach, although he said he saw value in internal coaches. Here, the value of having the outgoing principal at the table became clear. Lopez interjected that the value of a central office "advocate" for Accelerated Schools was to empower the whole school and ensure high-level representation. Such a well-placed person would be able to keep them informed about events that played an important role in the life of the school. Lopez reminded the group that the school viewed accessibility to a district representative as positive because it would be easier to share concerns, requests, challenges, expectations, and to plan in concert with other district managers and departments.

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Lopez furthered the discussion by reminding the group of the significant and practical reason for having external coaches; the two school administrators serve on specific cadres themselves and are not available to rotate to the other cadres to respond to administrative questions as freely as an external coach.

The Steering Committee closed the meeting resolved that some immediate action was necessary in order to move forward to several agreed-upon objectives: (1) to replace the two outgoing coaches by creating a process enabling coaching candidates to be nominated, (2) assuring that funds existed for those coaches to be trained immediately, (3) that any principal who were to be selected for the school also be trained, (4) that the coaching be from an "external" source and if possible, in conjunction with an internal coach.

### **Action Plans**

The closure of the meeting involved the Steering Committee and the existing principal drafting a "job description" for both the external administrator/coach and for the internal coach. Following the meeting, Marchi seemed to be persuaded by the arguments for having an external coach; this was later confirmed when the district's Director for Educational Services contacted the National Center inquiring about dates for the upcoming coaches training. The prospective principal was also invited to attend the training.

In summary, the respect shown to the Steering Committee and school-as-a-whole by asking for input prior to final decisions being made demonstrated the district's willingness to honor a process that one of its schools has deeply committed to. The committee felt that "being heard" enabled them to take a sense of unity back to the rank and file staff-as-a-whole when the committee members reported back to their respective cadres. The committee also felt an immediate impact from the Accelerated Schools process, the kind of impact had

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long been sought as the school moved through the various stages of implementation.

Perhaps other schools and districts may want to adopt a similar openness when contemplating transitions of this kind rather than imposing people and systems onto schools that simply want to continue being a part of decisions that most deeply affect them.

### **A New Challenge Emerges**

In an unexpected turn of events, the prospective principal who attended the March meeting, declined to further advance his candidacy, ultimately deciding to take a year to travel and study. Once again, the school found itself faced with the uncertainty of having a new principal assigned who could potentially derail their progress due to their relative unfamiliarity with the model. However, having already discussed their concerns with the superintendent, Marchi was prepared to select a new principal for Sherwood who could help them move forward as an Accelerated School.

As a final candidate for one of three open positions in the district, Mary Magaña was asked by Marchi about her interest in leading Sherwood as an Accelerated school. She was present at the school's vision celebration in 1994 and, as a coordinator in state and federal projects for the district, she was already aware of the unique environment at Sherwood. Having just completed her administrative credential, looking for her first principal placement, Magaña saw a place for her style of leadership at Sherwood.

"I came from the district office and I got to see a lot of the process and how they were involving all of their community, making the effort to work together, making decisions for Sherwood School and Sherwood kids," explained Magaña. "The other thing that I saw that I really liked was the commitment that they had to making the place a better learning environment for kids--commitment that I

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saw in terms of the staff trying to get together to provide staff development that was meaningful for each one of them. (Corral and Wagner, 1997). Upon the news of Magaña's selection, Gubser reported that the school community felt heard and she was pleased that the school was provided with a principal whose work-style would fit in. "I think he was true to his word in picking Mary" (Corral and Wagner, 1997).

The assistant superintendent found a candidate for external coach and the school offered the other open coaching position to members of the school community, presumably to be combined with other responsibilities at the school as internal coaches. An application was submitted from two staff persons requesting that they perform the job jointly, retaining their old positions and most aspects of their jobs that they especially valued while sharing the responsibilities of the coaching position. Each would assume responsibilities for which they offered special strengths. One had talked to the outgoing coaches about this possibility, and everyone was very positive about their future as coaches; this is a fine example of operationally "building on strengths."

The acceptance of this "coach position jointly served" went to the Steering Committee, and via bulletin, to the total staff, for input or concerns. The school-as-a-whole approved these recommendations and initiated plans to begin work with their new coaches. In preparation for the new school year, Sherwood's internal coaches Gubser and Alana Ortiz, attended training at the National Center along with Magaña and the new district coach, Brian Centeno.

With renewed district support, Sherwood may prove to be ahead of its time in its inclusion of school personnel in the hiring of an administrator. They took responsibility for the important role of the site administrator, going as far as to ask for simple dialogue with the district on the matter. Although they were initially paralyzed by the triple whammy of losing a principal and two coaches

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simultaneously, they were up to the challenge of doing something about it by firming up their district partnership more solidly and putting themselves in a position to begin the new school year with more trained school personnel at the ready. Simply put, they followed the process.

## Summary

- Allow a school faced with the prospect of having a new principal the opportunity to provide input prior to final hiring decisions being made. Reinforce the values of the Accelerated Schools Project as this input is provided.
- Employ the school's Steering Committee in its role as a central "clearinghouse of information" to help provide a platform for stakeholders to communicate schoolwide input based on sharing concerns, suggestions, and desires directly with district hiring officers.
- Allow enough time for deep discussions about appropriate schoolwide responses to the district's decision to re-assign a principal. Don't expect one meeting to resolve such a "hot" issue as selecting a new administrator.
- Involve all stakeholders in developing criteria for hiring new principal, including the out-going principal.
- Ensure that all stakeholders are represented at meetings in which this issue is addressed.
- Ensure that communication back to the school-as-a-whole is thorough and interactive following any Steering Committee meeting in which representatives of the school-as-a-whole participate.
- Ensure that the final candidates are aligned with the Accelerated Schools philosophy.
- Ensure that final candidates for position understand the changing role of an Accelerated Schools principal and how coaches function in the context of helping schools implement the process.
- Ensure new administrator understands (1) the components of the Accelerated Schools governance structure (including frequency and purpose of cadres, Steering Committee, and school-as-a-whole); (2) the importance of maintaining focus on schoolwide Powerful Learning; (3) the role of the Inquiry Process as the arena for systemic change.
- Provide training opportunities for the new administrator.
- Ensure that school vision will be re-visited within a reasonable time so that administrator may add his or her strengths to the overall vision the school has for itself.
- Ensure that the new administrator understands the type and depth of support provided by the Accelerated Schools Center that mentors the school.

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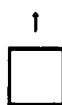
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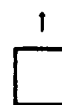
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